

# Men and Videogames

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**Presented at the Southwest Texas ACA/PCA Conference  
February 09, 2006**

When critics consider gender and videogames, it is usually from the perspective of women and games: how women are portrayed in videogames, who are female players and what are their play habits, and how to get more women to play games. These studies have certainly been beneficial in not only increasing industry awareness of women and games but also in designing and marketing games women will enjoy playing, and ultimately helping make videogames more mainstream. Yet where men and videogames are concerned, the literature is decidedly barren, focusing more on the effects of violence in games rather than what games mean to men, and how men are defined and portrayed in games.

Perhaps this is because males have been the core audience of videogames since before there was something that could even be called a videogame industry – the first game designers and players were predominantly male students at universities and laboratories.<sup>1</sup> And yet, the commercial game industry's core audience of 8-13 year old boys of the 80's<sup>2</sup> has since grown to become the increasingly mainstream audience it is today, with some reports placing the average gamer at age 30<sup>3</sup> and a very recent study by the BBC placing the percentage of female gamers at around 45%,<sup>4</sup> up from previous estimates of 20% of the early 80s and 90s<sup>5</sup> and the 33% female audience reported by Sega<sup>6</sup> in 1997. In addition, sports games, gender-neutral titles like *The Sims*, and online games have helped the market become increasingly mainstream. This means the industry now contains a much larger numbers of gamers<sup>7</sup> along with an increasing variety in gamers' social backgrounds, so while the teen male gamer may remain the norm in the popular mind, this stereotype is steadily changing.

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<sup>1</sup> Dungeons and Dreamers provides an excellent overview of early game development in universities. (25-34)

<sup>2</sup> Peter Main, former Nintendo public representative, mentions Nintendo's initial market: "We wanted to break out from the historic video-game user, boys eight to thirteen, because the thirteen-year-old boy will soon be fourteen years old and pass from our grip." (Sheff, 292).

<sup>3</sup> The ESA Top 10 Industry FAQs ([http://www.theesa.com/facts/top\\_10\\_facts.php](http://www.theesa.com/facts/top_10_facts.php)).

<sup>4</sup> The BBC State of Play study ([http://crystalltips.typepad.com/wonderland/files/bbc\\_uk\\_games\\_research\\_2005.pdf](http://crystalltips.typepad.com/wonderland/files/bbc_uk_games_research_2005.pdf)) did state several popular game genres but did not state specific popular titles. However, if the UK is any indication of gaming in the United States, we can expect upwards of 40% of gamers as women. The study did not, however, state what specific games women (and men) were playing (it merely divided them into genres) or how many games were being purchased rather than played for free on the Internet or at a friend's house. The study defined gamers as people who had played some form of interactive entertainment at least once in the six months prior to the study.

<sup>5</sup> A very informal 1983 study by Kaplan found roughly 20% of a small survey of players to be female; a 1990 study by Kubey and Larson found similar results in adolescents, noting that gameplay among girls dropped by two thirds in grades 7-9. Neither study focused directly on adult gamers, though there was certainly a sizeable number of adult gamers in the US as advertising shows not only on TV and print but also in arcades, as seen in first study. A sizeable number of mature and pornographic games, such as *Custer's Revenge*, were also marketed directly at adults. Kaplan did, however, record two ads posted outside arcades in Toledo, Ohio that were specifically targeted towards adult businessmen. One in particular mentions a businessman's special offering free play on any twenty-five cent machine during off hours, to "Take A Break From The Office" (Kaplan, 93).

<sup>6</sup> In *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, Sega public relations consultant Lee McEnany Caraher stated in an interview that, "If you look at Sega overall, about 33 percent of our market is girls," and this without directly marketing girls as an audience (194).

<sup>7</sup> The ESA ([http://www.theesa.com/facts/sales\\_genre\\_data.php](http://www.theesa.com/facts/sales_genre_data.php)) reports an almost 100% industry sales growth and an increase of over 140 million units in sales from 1996 to 2004.

However, because men – or males in general – have always played videogames, their presence is taken as a given. After all, why should male gamers want to study themselves and why would companies spend valuable resources investigating how to target and understand an audience that already plays games? And yet, it is exactly because so many men play videogames and are affected by them that men and videogames are worth studying, and not just in terms of how they are impacted violence but in terms of what videogames mean to them and how male videogame characters are defined. Because male gamers compose the majority of the gaming population and male characters compose the majority of videogame heroes, they are worth studying in order to better understand them, just as it is important to study women in videogames. What makes videogames important to male gamers? Why do they play? And how do videogames affect gamers and their perceptions of male roles?

I do not have a complete answer for these questions – such an answer will require considerably more research in this field. I have, however, investigated this topic and produced some results that will hopefully provide a starting point for future research. Future studies might consider relationships between the player and the character in terms of gender, such as how male players are defined by the characters they play and how players react when playing as characters of a different gender. Because videogames are interactive, how the player reacts to the characters and feels when playing their roles should also be considered. For instance, how does a player feel when he is controlling Solid Snake versus Lara Croft? How does a female gamer feel?

Players are certainly affected by the games they play and these effects will differ depending on a player's cultural and social background. Though some critics argue these effects are minimal or nonexistent during game play<sup>8</sup>, players certainly develop a relationship with the character through empathy and identity depending on the type of game and the state of play. One need look no further than the grief expressed by many *Final Fantasy VII* players upon the death of Aeris to realize just how deep a relationship can be developed between the player and the character, regardless of the extent this relationship is manifested during intense play.

This paper specifically examines the use of male characters in games and how they represent concepts of masculinity, what we might consider the essence of how society defines 'male-ness.' To begin with, perceptions of masculinity vary culturally and temporally and are not geographical and historical constants. Gender roles are social and cultural constructs, and concepts of masculinity will differ depending on several factors

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<sup>8</sup> James Newman, for example, suggests that the player is not aware of the relationship with the character during deep, immersive play, which may be equated with Newman's definition of On-Line play by the primary player. In this state of play, the character becomes an extension of the player as a set of tools or solutions to a given problem. Thus, it is not so much the fact that Lara Croft is a woman but that Lara Croft has the ability to jump a certain distance, and that distance is not far enough to reach the other side of a chasm, so the player must instead find another way across (The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame). We can thus compare the relationship of the player to the character with that of a pilot controlling a remote underwater RV in order to examine different levels of empathy and identity as experienced by players in different kinds of games and states of play.

including race, culture, gender, class, and sexuality. For instance, the masculine ideals of Hellenistic Greece centering on athleticism and philosophy may certainly have similarities with the contemporary American ideals, but the two are vastly different, particularly when we consider differences in portrayal of the male body and publicly acceptable forms of male relationships. Likewise, concepts of masculinity in the United States will differ from those of Japan, one of the largest centers of videogame development. Due to cultural and language differences, concepts of masculinity in videogames released in both countries will lose some effect as they become localized. As such, one character may have different meanings in Japan than he does in the United States, and vice versa. Thus, we need to not only consider the context of the game's audience but also the developer backgrounds and origins of the game. The most obvious contexts are differences between Japanese and American games, but we also need to consider the race and gender of game developers as well as their design intents.

Due to the variety of cultural and social backgrounds of gamers, when we discuss "masculinity and videogames," we need to make clear what kind of masculinity we are talking about. Are we investigating a monolithic white male concept of masculinity as found in contemporary America, or are we considering gender as a continuum of identities varying depending on social and cultural background?<sup>9</sup> It is thus easy to consider concepts of masculinity in terms of patriarchal white American ideals and neglect Japanese influences on their representations as well as black and Latino concepts of masculinity. Because of this, a truly in-depth gender study will need to consider identity in games from the multiple angles of the audience as well as the developer, and perhaps also from the perspectives of non-gamers, who have always affected the popular interpretations of videogames.

Due to this complexity, I have focused my study of masculinity in games on what types of masculine characters are presented in videogames, and in this case specifically male protagonists rather than NPCs and villains. However, instead of merely being a survey of male protagonists, this study also asks how complex and diverse are the identities of male videogame protagonists and what this level of variety means for videogames.

It is perhaps easiest to start with one of the most obvious masculine stereotypes: the action hero. Here is a character who is physically fit, sometimes to the point of being over-muscular, and is also skilled in martial combat. Iconic characters such as Rambo and Dutch (Arnold Schwarzenegger, *Predator*) are depicted with an emphasis on upper body strength as well as on combat ability and martial domination through large high-powered automatic weapons, combat gear, and ammo belts. There is one specific term for this kind of character: macho.

"Macho" is derived from the Spanish word, "machismo," which refers to an over-conforming towards traditional masculine gender roles, an excess of masculinity. In machismo, masculine attributes are stressed through physical courage, virility,

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<sup>9</sup> This multi-faceted approach to gender studies was promoted particularly through recent scholarship by Bell Hooks (*Feminism: A Move to End Sexist Oppression*) and can be seen in critical video game theory by Ernest Adams (*Not Just Rappers and Athletes: Minorities in Videogames*) and David Leonard (*High Tech Blackface – Race, sports Video Games and Becoming the Other*).

domination of women, aggression, and an expression of dominance through confrontation, but these attributes are also coupled with a diminishing of “negative” feminine traits such as the expression of emotion, fear, and docility. Machismo is an affirmation of manliness and the denial, diminishment, and subjugation of femininity. However, the macho man is merely one type of dominant patriarchal, monolithic ideal of masculinity, and such defining perceptions have variations in many cultures, so we should not expect this to be a global standard. There are many action games such as *Contra*, *Doom*, and *Duke Nukem* with protagonists who fit this stereotype.

One trend with videogame action heroes has been to present them with a sense of humor. Humor allows male characters to humiliate their opponents while dispatching them and can also be used to lighten a tense situation. Characters who crack jokes can also gain charismatic value – not only does the hero work hard, but he also plays hard and so is an interesting guy who is fun to hang out with. Recent videogame heroes with a sense of humor are Dante from *Devil May Cry*, Master Chief from *Halo*, and Solid Snake from *Metal Gear Solid*. Masculine videogame heroes may also have an air of cockiness, or self-assuredness. They stride about the play field, confident in their powers and aren’t afraid to criticize their opponents. These characteristics tend to reinforce the macho ideal, but are not limited to it.

In conjunction with the macho hero type is the special forces soldier, a man who has trained his entire life in the martial arts to become a master warrior. This professional soldier is found in Western heroes such as Sam Shephard from *Tom Clancy’s Splinter Cell*, but this hero also has clear connotations with Asian cultures and characteristics specific to the East, deriving specifically from a long tradition of martial arts.

In Asia, the martial arts were reduced to a philosophy with a particular emphasis on unarmed combat. Professional warriors spent their entire lives mastering their particular fighting style or weapon of choice. In Japan, for instance, an ideal of the *samurai* warriors was to culminate a lifetime of skill into a singular moment in combat when all the years of training would be applied in a swift, fluid motion where man and sword would become one.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of a professional soldier is certainly not limited to the East, as marksmanship and fencing have been ideals in Western culture for hundreds of years. The professional soldier can thus be considered a cultural element found in societies in which martial skill is beneficial not only in military combat but also in non-military uses such as hunting. The primary difference between East and West though is the Eastern philosophy where martial arts reflects the order of nature and can be used to strengthen the spirit.

The concept of a warrior who has spent his entire life in training can be seen in many Japanese videogames featuring distinctly Eastern warriors such as *ninja* and *samurai*. Games such as *Shinobi* and *Ninja Gaiden* feature master warriors who are often leaders

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<sup>10</sup> This concept was certainly influenced by Zen Buddhism, and so is a particular characteristic of the Tokugawa Period.

of their clans or are the last surviving member of a clan and thus destined to prove their skills in combat and ensure their tradition is carried on in a new generation of disciples.

Martial arts also finds its way into the popular genre of fighting games, from *Street Fighter* to *Dead or Alive*. Fighting game characters often have detailed histories outlining their motives and are masters of specific martial arts forms. These games usually draw diverse characters with fighting styles from all over the world, so they are not so much a celebration of one particular fighting style, but a fine celebration of martial arts in general. Martial arts games are also not limited to Japanese developers, and several popular titles have been developed in America, including Jordan Mechner's classic *Karateka* (1984) and Midway's controversial *Mortal Kombat*.

The West's interest in Eastern martial arts can be traced to military encounters and colonialism in the Far East where soldiers were first exposed to Eastern fighting styles. Originally seen as exotic, soldiers quickly realized martial arts training could greatly enhance soldiers' combat skills. By World War II, marines and special forces units in particular were being trained in Japanese martial arts, and later conflicts in Korea and Vietnam greatly increased their combat repertoire. Cultural exchange between East and West, particularly through Hong Kong action films, as well as the portrayal of American soldiers using Eastern martial arts skills in film, developed popular interest in Eastern martial arts, leading to the proliferation of martial arts schools across the country dedicated to their study.

The concept of the specially trained soldier has remained in the West, with particular veneration given to elite forces such as the navy SEALs, commandoes, Green Berets, and army rangers. Special forces units have particular appeal in science fiction narratives where soldiers are not only highly trained in combat but also enhanced by technology through advanced weaponry, armor, and cybernetic enhancements. They are trained to do only one thing, and do it well. Through their training, characters such as Strider Hiryu (*Strider*) become one-man armies capable of defeating anything in their path.

In other cases, soldiers may be genetically grown or altered to increase combat skill. Solid Snake from *Metal Gear Solid* and Master Chief from *Halo* are two such genetically engineered soldiers. Their skills are often enhanced by technology, Snake through his stealth suit and Master Chief through his body armor, but they are also powerful soldiers on their own. Snake, however, differs from other videogame heroes of his type in that he is a reluctant hero, less willing to kill his opponents.<sup>11</sup> He is conflicted with his nature as a clone, seeking to come to terms with his identity, adding a level of philosophy that is for the most part absent in other action heroes.

In addition to the action hero, the more traditional hero from myth and legend is also a popular choice, one usually found in RPGs (Role-Playing Games), and based around archetypes found in hero myths.<sup>12</sup> This is unsurprising considering many games have

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<sup>11</sup> Metal Gear Pacifist

<sup>12</sup> For a good introduction to the hero myth and studies in comparative mythology, read Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, 1973) and *The Power of Myth* (Doubleday, 1988).

narratives borrowed from traditional storytelling, and there are even articles for creating characters inspired by myth and legend using the Hero's Journey as a model.<sup>13</sup> Common motifs are the orphaned or fatherless child, as well as the unpromising child and the prodigal youth. The hero is confronted with destiny to travel forth into the world and restore order, and in some games, the narrative follows a hero who starts out with a wooden stick and a handful of coins, and through many battles and quests becomes the dragon-slaying warrior who saves the world.

The hero myth may be seen as a metaphor for life – the monsters the hero defeats and the trials he overcomes represent his real-world problems and inner demons. Only through overcoming these tasks does the hero find his or her path in life and give something positive back to society, becoming an adult. Traditional heroes are thus transitional figures from adolescence to adulthood and can be either male or female, the character becoming a mature man or woman at the end of the quest, falling into an appropriate adult role. In videogames, however, while there are many heroes inspired from myth and legend, few fully mature by the end, leaving one with the impression they will continue their quests in many more adventures, retaining some level of adolescence. Typical heroes of this type include Ryu (*Breath of Fire*), Alex (*Lunar: The Silver Star*), and Arc (*Arc the Lad*).

We also find several instances of the Fool as videogame heroes. The Fool is an archetypal character with little skill or strength, often uncoordinated, but has the innate ability to save the day against all odds, and usually by accident. Because of this, he is a form of antihero or unlikely hero. While the action hero will actively seek out trouble, trouble often finds the Fool, though he may often bumble into his problems. By saving the day against all odds, the Fool demonstrates that one does not need to be masculine in order to succeed. What allows him to succeed is that his heart is in the right place in his at times naïve desire to perform good deeds and his determination to never give up in the face of adversity. The Fool can also serve as an ego booster to the player: when the hero is defeated (usually in a somewhat hilariously painful demise), while the player has made a mistake, he can say he is at least not as hopeless as the Fool.

There are a surprisingly large number of Fools in videogames, particularly in Lucasarts adventure titles such as Bernardo Bernoulli from *Day of the Tentacle* (Dave Grossman and Tim Schafer; Lucasarts, 1993), a stereotypical nerd, and Guybrush Threepwood of *Monkey Island* (Dave Grossman and Tim Schafer; Lucasarts, 1990), a hopeless young lad whose only notable ability is the capacity to hold his breath for ten minutes and whose sole desire is to become a pirate. Their company also includes Roger Wilco (Matt Crowe and Scott Murphy, *Space Quest*; Sierra, 1987-1995), a janitor for the space fleet forced to save the galaxy from evil aliens.

While characters up until this point have translated well into Western culture, there is one particular character type unique to Japan that has distinct cultural differences with

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<sup>13</sup>“Into the Woods: A Practical Guide to the Hero's Journey” ([http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20050617/bates\\_01.shtml](http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20050617/bates_01.shtml)) and “Using the Hero's Journey in Games [http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20001127/dunniway\\_01.htm](http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20001127/dunniway_01.htm)” are two good examples.

contemporary American culture, the *bishounen*, a man who possesses ideal beauty, and more specifically feminine beauty. *Bishounen* are often extremely elegant and fair of features, and their closest similarity to American culture is perhaps the dandy or the romantic lover. In Japan, the term was originally used to refer to the ideal young homosexual lover but it also has connotations with early *kabuki* theater where effeminate males played female roles, and the homosexual connotations in some periods lead to the banning of *kabuki*. Applications of *bishounen* in videogames are used more to present the aesthetic beauty of masculine heroes, most popularly seen in Ayami Kojima's *Castlevania* concept art, but is also present to some degree in other characters, such as Dante from *Devil May Cry*<sup>14</sup> and Raiden from *Metal Gear Solid 2*. Raiden in particular tests the limits of the masculine hero, for despite his ruthless efficiency in battle, his effeminate appearance more closely resembles someone's girlfriend than a traditional action hero. He is at one point groped by the President, who mistook him for a girl. This ambiguity has led to a running gag in the *Metal Gear Solid* series but has been less appreciated in the West due to cultural differences.

In contrast to the *bishounen* is the particularly American emphasis on ruggedness and individuality. The hero is expected to solve problems with little or no outside help and also demonstrates stamina and the ability to endure pain as well as demonstrate miraculous recuperating powers. One traditional scene found in some types of action films finds the hero assaulted by his opponents, beaten almost to the point of death. The hero manages to escape, then recuperates, becoming more powerful through the healing process as he hones his reflexes and gains complete control over his body.<sup>15</sup>

While contemporary heroes in the West are generally not as admired for aesthetic beauty as the *bishounen* of Japan, they are observed in a particular way through the male gaze, a controlling gaze that objectifies.<sup>16</sup> Instead of being observed in terms of facial beauty, male heroes are embodied as spectacle – they observed in action, moving with a distinct fluidity, each movement premeditated, rehearsed, a pose in motion. The audience is left in awe of the power of the hero as he masters his environment, then is savagely beaten by his opponents and demonstrates his ability to heal, and finally masters his body by turning it into a mass of reflexes.<sup>17</sup>

Videogames take the male gaze a step further, for instead simply objectifying the character, the player is given complete control over the character's actions. Not only do players get to watch the hero, but they also get to control him and perhaps feel what it is like to be the hero. The best videogame characters are designed to move beautifully and fluidly – the player controls their moves and is rewarded with the spectacle of brilliant

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<sup>14</sup> Dante's fair features are also related to his status as son of a supernatural creature. Like Alucard, the son of *Castlevania*'s Dracula, Dante is presented as overly elegant as a manifestation of his supernatural genealogy.

<sup>15</sup> This reference specifically refers to the action films of Clint Eastwood and John Ford as studied by Paul Smith in "Eastwood Bound" (*Constructing Masculinity*, 77-97).

<sup>16</sup> The male gaze refers to the objectification of the subject, particularly the female subject. The term is primarily used in regards to sexual objectification, though here it is being used in the objectification of any subject, reducing the individual from a person to an object of study. Jay Bolter and David Grusin provide an overview of the male gaze in *Remediation* (78-84).

<sup>17</sup> Paul Smith (80-83).



character animation. Particularly well-animated characters such as *Alucard* from *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* are a joy watch, and can sometimes captivate players through the animation quality and the refined actions. The relationship between the male audience and the male hero perhaps then becomes one of admiration and a desire to emulate the fluid, choreographed moves of the hero.<sup>18</sup>

While this list of characters and characteristics is far from complete, it does present some ideas regarding representations of male characters. Character representations are often shallow and present stereotypes rather than deep, complex characters. While popular videogame hero stereotypes are certainly important to videogames as they help male players act out male adventure fantasies, they also have the negative function of reinforcing stereotypes and unrealistic ideals. This is because there are few examples of heroes who break these stereotypes by expressing flaws and personality, just like ordinary people. In order to dispel stereotypes, they must be broken down and exposed for what they are.

One way of breaking down stereotypes is through satire. In satire, the designer creates a character who is such an extreme example of the stereotype so as to become farce, showing the inaccuracies and ridiculousness of the stereotype by mocking it with either a character with too much masculinity or too little. A good example of the first type is found in the cartoon *Johnny Bravo*. Johnny Bravo is a stereotypically blond male, an egotistic body builder who digs chicks, dresses in jeans, a short-sleeved black shirt, and shades, and combs his hair like Elvis. He tries to impress the ladies through his looks and charm, but ends up irritating them rather than wooing them through his ego and stupidity. Johnny Bravo has similarities with Dirk the Daring from *Dragon's Lair* (Rick Dyer and Don Bluth; Cinematronics, 1983), the king's bravest – but not always brightest – knight on a quest to rescue Princess Daphne from the clutches of an evil dragon. Dirk fits the stereotype of the heroic knight with shining armor and a righteous quest, except for his stupidity – he blindly charges through each encounter, swinging his sword in a flair of bravado, and investigating anything that looks mildly interesting, particularly in obviously trap-filled rooms.

There are few other characters in videogames who satirize masculinity, but two are Duke Nukem (*Duke Nukem*) and Marco Rossi (*Metal Slug*, SNK). Duke Nukem is borderline satire: his character takes masculinity to an extreme level that seems to teeter over the edge, with a stereotypical muscle-build, blond hair, big guns, big ego, and plenty of virility. It can be difficult to tell at times if Duke is serious or satirical or if the player is taking him seriously. How can one tell if the character is serious or a satire?

Marco Rossi, on the other hand, is more easily defined as farce. He is the stereotypical Rambo-soldier, like those found in *Contra*, only taken over the extreme edge. He wields a variety of heavy weaponry, blasts maniacally with his machinegun, and triumphantly slices through enemies with a machete. Upon completing a mission he stands in a clearly masculine dominant pose with legs apart, leaning on his rifle or holding his arm in a big

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<sup>18</sup> When the male gaze is used on female characters, on the other hand, it can become closer to ultimate control, particularly where the sexual nature of the woman is emphasized.

thumbs-up while he laughs triumphantly, reminding us of the stereotype he represents. A flyer for the first *Metal Slug* arcade game shows a cigar-chomping Marco with an arsenal of all variety of weaponry strapped to his back, charging forward gung-ho.<sup>19</sup> We do not doubt for a moment that Marco looks ridiculous, and this ridiculousness draws attention to his stereotype. While Marco is not as detailed a satire of masculine stereotypes as is Johnny Bravo (and indeed, *Metal Slug* is more an excess of surreal warfare to the point of absurdity), he does bring attention to the masculine action hero stereotype by taking it above and beyond the limits.

However, satirical characters can be caught in their own farce, becoming that which they at first seem to critique. While the slew of *Metal Slug* sequels have remained wacky and retain some satirical features, they often end up reinforcing the macho stereotype by failing to continuously satirize it. At this point the player either forgets the satire or is no longer aware that the character is satirical and simply gets caught up in the action. For this reason, care should be taken with satirical characters to prevent them from becoming that which they seek to make foolish.

A second way of upsetting a stereotype is to create a character who at first seems to fit the stereotype but possesses qualities that defy it. These characters give a more accurate representation of reality because real people aren't perfect or easy to label due to their complexity. For instance, the protagonists of *Eternal Darkness* (Dennis Dyack; Silicon Knights, 2002) are complex characters who defy gender roles. Such characters include Maximillian Roivas, a heavysset colonial doctor in his mid-fifties, Roberto Bianchi a Venitian architect and artist, and Peter Jacob, a journalist during World War I. These characters are flawed: they are not idealized or simple stereotypes but are complex characters with their own ideals, beliefs, personalities, and foibles. They are closer to being real people than a stereotype or idealized hero ever will be, though they do find they have to perform martial deeds in order to save the world from evil. The depth of their characterizations and their presence as more or less average people, at least, makes them more interesting than the standard masculine hero.

From a design perspective, the added benefit of creating a nontraditional hero means there is less competition for design. In a sea of action heroes, a newcomer must find some way to out-action the action heroes, to out-master Master Chief and out-snake Solid Snake. This requires that the character not only be vastly more impressive than the run of the mill hero, but also that the game play phenomenally better than the average game.<sup>20</sup> Only in a few cases, such as Sam Shepherd from *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell* series, do new Masculine Heroes manage to rise above the mold, differentiating themselves from other Masculine Heroes through a stronger persona and a better game.

On the other hand, if the designer creates a nontraditional hero, this new hero does not have to compete as much with other heroes. Instead of competing directly with an ocean

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<sup>19</sup> This artwork appears on the flyers of both the Japanese (<http://www.arcadeflyers.net/?page=flyerdb&subpage=flyer&id=1916&image=1>) and European versions (<http://www.arcadeflyers.net/?page=flyerdb&subpage=flyer&id=1571&image=1>). Both are available on Arcade Flyers ([www.arcadeflyers.net](http://www.arcadeflyers.net)).

<sup>20</sup> Part of what makes a good character is that the game play good, thus I will add here the quote of Miyamoto regarding Mario.

of Master Chiefs in an attempt to stand above the rest, the hero may instead have to compete only with a small puddle of Guybrush Threepwoods – or maybe even have the entire pool to himself. This means the character stands out through his uniqueness and dominates the other heroes by playing on different turf rather than trying to master them at their own game.

To the player, fresh heroes provide variety for a game world shaded by different stereotypes. The character's complexity, his strengths as well as his imperfections, help make him more appealing and help the player empathize. Maximillian Roivas, for example, has developed something of a cult following through his psychological quirks that slowly manifest themselves as he is confronted with evil creatures beyond his understanding until he is finally consumed by his insanity.

Character complexities can also add depth to a standard save-the-world plot by providing the character with internal conflicts to overcome. The *Final Fantasy* series, for example, features a large selection of characters with particular character flaws, many of which stem from a profound event in their past. In *Final Fantasy VI*, Locke Cole is superficially an adventurous treasure hunter (or thief), not too much unlike Indiana Jones. In the past, he lost his love in a cave accident and so under his joyful exterior he is consumed with loss and an obsession with protecting those he cares for. Edgar and Sabin Figaro decided who would rule their kingdom on the toss of a coin – Edgar stayed to rule, posing as a suave debonair while secretly supporting a rebellion, while Sabin left for the mountains to become a martial arts master. The complex character development and struggles of these characters to overcome their personal struggles makes them more memorable through the player's empathy with them.

Still, the majority of videogame heroes tend to fit male stereotypes. Masculine heroes often leave something to be desired<sup>21</sup> and have room for plenty of improvement. While there is certainly a necessity for stereotypical masculine heroes to meet the desires of male gamers, there needs to be many more male heroes who break the definitions of masculine stereotypes by depicting characters with human flaws and from a wide selection of society. Videogames need to demonstrate that heroes do not have to fit within cleanly outlined gender roles and can have as much complexity as characters from film and literature. Hopefully, as developers become more concerned with composing videogame narratives and creating new ways in which games are played, videogame protagonists – both male and female – will become characters players can empathize with and see as reflections of real people they can relate to rather than idealized stereotypes that can produce a false sense of reality.

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<sup>21</sup> Though certainly not as much so as their feminine counterparts. It is also much more difficult to complain about playing a dominant masculine hero role all the time than it is a princess who needs rescuing, particularly when it is a man doing the complaining.

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